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### Proudly proactive

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Title - Proudly proactive: Celebrating and supporting LGBT+ students in Scotland

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Biography: Hazel Marzetti is a researcher at the University of Edinburgh, where she works on a range of education projects. Her interests include queer community development and education, LGBT+ spaces and groups, UK higher education, queer herstory, queer intersectional feminist research methods, creative research methods, mental health and youth work. Hazel uses she/her pronouns.

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**Abstract.**

The absence of data regarding UK university students' sexualities and trans identities has, for too long, rendered lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT+) student communities invisible. This interview-based study aims to explore the experiences of LGBT+ students at a Scottish university, beginning to address this gap in research. This study argues that despite perceptions from staff and prospective students that universities are welcoming to LGBT+ students, and attempts from institutions to comply with equalities legislation, the reality is homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and queer phobia creeps into students' lives both on and off campus. This has therefore necessitated the student-led provision of exclusively LGBT+ 'safe spaces' to allow LGBT+ students to explore and express their identities fearlessly. In order to challenge the current campus climate, this paper thus argues that a radical shift is required in order to transform institutions to successfully support and celebrate LGBT+ campus communities, allowing universities to truly call themselves 'proudly proactive'.

**Introduction: Queer Invisibility.**

The systematic absence of investigation into and data on the experiences of LGBT+<sup>1</sup> students studying at universities in the UK has, for too long, been left unchallenged. Until 2015 students at UK universities did not have the option to declare their sexualities or trans identities through the University College Admission Services' (UCAS) application form (UCAS 2015). As a result identifying LGBT+ students at UK universities was comparatively more difficult than identifying students with other characteristics protected under the Equality Act 2010, such as disabled, women, and

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<sup>1</sup> It is acknowledged that the language used in this paper will not be immediately clear to all, therefore a glossary of terms has been included in Appendix 1 to clarify.

black and minority ethnic (BME) students, whose educational outcomes have been officially monitored for longer. Thus, the LGBT+ student population in the UK has been somewhat invisible. To understand LGBT+ students' experiences previously required universities to proactively monitor them, and it is unclear whether any institution attempted to do so. However, the introduction of monitoring students' sexualities and trans identities through UCAS offers universities the potential to help facilitate understanding of the experiences and educational outcomes of LGBT+ students<sup>2</sup>, although it is yet unclear whether this potential will be realised.

Despite this lack of systematic institutional monitoring there have been a small number of research projects investigating the experiences of LGBT+ students in the UK (particularly in England and Wales) over the last decade (Formby 2015; Valentine et al. 2009; Ellis 2009; Taulke-Johnson 2010a&b). These studies have revealed two dominant experiences of LGBT+ students studying at university. Firstly, that LGBT+ university students have experienced what I will term 'cisheteronormativity'. This extends the more commonly used 'heteronormativity', describing the oppressive, pervasive orientation and organisation of society around a compulsory heteroromantic heterosexuality, which can in turn alienate those that identify their sexuality queerly (Rich 1980; Ahmed 2006), to 'cisheteronormativity' in order to include the compulsory cisgender norm that oppresses and alienates trans people (Ansara & Hegarty 2012; Ansara & Hegarty 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> Although there is no room here to explore it here, it is noted that there are still limitations to current monitoring.

Studies suggest that in universities this cisheteronormativity plays out in multiple ways: when LGBT+ students study a curriculum wholly comprised of cisheteronormative subject-matter, or when the only mention of queer subject-matter is to point out deviance from this norm, LGBT+ students are othered (Chesnut 1998; Formby 2015; Renn 1998). When LGBT+ students are rendered invisible through the presumption of cisgender, heterosexual, heteroromantic (cishet) identities by central support services (such as university health centres, counsellors or careers advisors) the space to discuss queer lives is narrowed, and queer students are othered (Formby 2015). When Students' Association (SA) or Union (SU) events cater specifically to cishet relationships through what have been described as 'misogyny themed events' (Kingsley 2012), LGBT+ students can feel that they are othered by their SA or SU, which is meant to function as a representative body for all students (Taulke-Johnson 2008). Universities' systematic exclusion of trans people in their physical designs: lacking gender-neutral toilets and organising halls of residence into single-sex flats is othering, and may also be problematic for cisgender students whose gender expression transgresses societal expectations and who therefore experience transphobia despite not identifying as trans (Formby 2015).

Through this process of othering, universities establish a cisheteronormative 'campus climate', by which I mean an institutional atmosphere across their campuses, including but not limited to the classrooms, laboratories, accommodation, student services, social spaces, and SAs and SUs (Ellis 2009; Rhoads 1994; Sanlo et al. 2002). This may symbolically suggest to LGBT+ students that although they may pass through university spaces, they are only visitors, and do not belong. In this way, it has been argued that people who transgress institutional norms are simultaneously

rendered both invisible and hyper-visible (Ahmed 2006). They are invisible whilst their existences and experiences are systematically denied by the university's cisheteronormativity, and they are hyper-visible in their deviation from this institutionally endorsed norm.

Against this backdrop of cisheteronormativity, students secondly reported direct experiences of queerphobic harassment and discrimination. I use the term 'queerphobia' specifically because, although terms like homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are more commonly used, queerphobia operates as an umbrella term. 'Queerphobia' describes the discrimination experienced by all LGBT+ people, including all people who live outside the constraints of cishet existences, such as homosexual, homoromantic, lesbian, bisexual, biromantic, trans, pansexual, panromantic, queer, asexual, aromantic, and demisexual people amongst many others. However, I will indicate if discrimination specifically targets a single, particular group.

The Equality Challenge Unit's work on the experiences of LGBT students studying at UK universities found that participants had experienced queerphobic comments, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse during their studies (Valentine et al. 2009). Further research proposed that instances of queerphobia were particularly common in university halls of residence (Taulke-Johnson 2010a; Valentine et al. 2009; Ellis 2009; Formby 2015; Evans & Brodio 1999; Robinson 1998), SU buildings (Taulke-Johnson 2008; Formby 2015; Ellis 2009), and social spaces such as university cafes (Ellis 2009). In most instances the perpetrators of the abuse were fellow students (Ellis 2009), however on occasion staff members were found to have

made queerphobic comments or jokes during their teaching (Valentine et al. 2009).

Where inappropriate comments were made by staff, they were disproportionately found in post-'92<sup>3</sup> institutions, and in specific disciplines: namely medicine, nursing, midwifery, business, languages, and engineering (Valentine et al. 2009).

It has been argued that when queerphobia arises staff who might wish to intervene are often woefully under-resourced and under-prepared to do so (Lucozzi 1998; Robinson 1998; Longerbeam et al. 2007). This in turn could be interpreted by the queer campus community as symbolic of the university as a cisheteronormative space, where LGBT+ identities are perceived as a disruption to the norm (Ahmed 2006). The lack of challenge to queerphobia, combined with cisheteronormativity may mean that students lack trust in their institutions and therefore work to self-moderate, avoiding being too 'out' and thus too disruptive to the institution's campus climate when accessing vital student services. Alternatively they may avoid accessing those services altogether (Formby 2015). This level of self-moderation in these spaces can be exhausting, demanding energy which might otherwise be focussed on their studies (Renn 1998), and more broadly may have a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing (Meyer 2003).

As aforementioned there is a paucity of research in this area in the UK, and no research focussing on Scotland specifically<sup>4</sup>. As there are distinct differences in political, and specifically educational contexts between Scotland and the rest of the

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<sup>3</sup> Post-'92 institutions is a term used to describe the group of institutions (often polytechnic or technical colleges), which became universities through powers granted by the 'Further and Higher Education Act' (1992) (Hunt 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Subsequent to this project's completion, the University of Strathclyde has undertaken research into trans people's experiences of university (University of Strathclyde 2017).

UK (RUK), it is possible that both the perceptions and lived experiences of LGBT+ students studying at universities in Scotland may be different to those studying in RUK institutions.

Politically, Scotland has its own devolved parliament and associated powers, and was in 2015 named by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association as the best place in Europe to be LGBTI, just ahead of the RUK in terms of marriage, hate crime prevention and legislative provision of intersex rights (ILGA 2015). Moving to the educational context, Scotland offers four-year undergraduate degrees as the standard undergraduate option (contrasted with the three-year degree in most of the RUK), free tuition to all Scottish and EU students (with the exception of students from the RUK), and some of the most expensive fees in the UK for students from the RUK. Given these differences I argue there is a gap in current research, which I aimed to address by asking:

- (i) What are the experiences of LGBT+ students studying at one Scottish university?
- (ii) Could any further provisions be made to celebrate and support LGBT+ students studying at university in Scotland, and if so how?

### **Methodology and methods.**

This research was underpinned by an intersectional, queer, feminist methodological framework, committed to being conscious of sexuality-based and gender-based oppression, and in particular how this interacts with other oppressions, including but not limited to racism, classism and ableism (Crenshaw 1989; Lorde 2013; Halberstam 2012; Narayan 2004). Although feminist and queer theory are often pitted as



opponents (Richardson et al. 2012; Halberstam 2012), I argue that they can be used to strengthen one another. I view the aims of both queer and feminist methodologies as challenging oppressive societal norms and constructing research that pushes for social change (Ackerly & True 2010; Halberstam 2012). Feminist methodology proposes that to fulfil these aims, we should orient our research around gender-based oppression, and particularly men's oppression of women (Harding 1987; Stanley & Wise 1993; Ackerly & True 2010), whereas queer methodology takes questioning everything as its central tenant, particularly that which presents itself as unproblematic, tidy, binary constructs (Browne & Nash 2010; Sedgwick 2008).

Although there is not sufficient space to discuss the intricacies of reconciling queer and feminist methodologies in this article, I will state that my queer, feminist methodology takes a beg, borrow and steal approach to its construction (Dahl 2010), using elements from a range of theories that fit with my ethics and allow me to create a methodology to answer my research questions, constructing what has been termed by Halberstam a 'Gaga Feminism' (2012). My queer, feminist methodology, I argue, is directed at challenging cisheteronormativity and shining a light on gender and sexuality based oppression, whilst looking optimistically for ways to strengthen policies and practices to improve the inclusion of LGBT+ people.

My standpoint as a cisgender, white, disabled, queer woman, has sensitised me to some common experiences within LGBT+ spaces and groups, and I have used the available literature to allow me to challenge assumptions that may have arisen from my own positionality and to widen my scope of understanding. An example of this can be found in my recruitment: socialising and organising in LGBT+ spaces has

sensitised me to the hierarchical power dynamics within these spaces, and aware of this I was conscious to look out for the reproduction of this in research. Indeed the over-representation of cisgender voices, men's voices, white voices, and the voices of those without disability was clear in the literature, which I noted as problematic and sought to address. As I recognised that participants might have experienced barriers to participation within LGBT+ spaces and groups I aimed to create a research environment that would facilitate participants feeling comfortable to share their stories. I did so firstly by being up-front about my own positionality with them and secondly by selecting a semi-structured interview method to allow participants privacy and space to raise their perspectives and priorities (recognising them as experts in their own experiences), whilst also providing some structure to guide (Oakley 1992; Kvale 2013).

To recruit I began by approaching the student LGBT+ groups as 'gate keepers' explaining who I was and my aims, but unfortunately received no response. Although I have no way of knowing why this was the case, from previous personal experience in similar groups this might have been because the group leaders are volunteers and can be overloaded with organisational tasks, because they get lots of similar requests which can make the population feel rather over researched, or simply due to a self-consciousness about their group. Therefore instead I decided to post directly onto social media requesting participants, particularly targeting social media platforms for the organisation and representation of the underrepresented LGBT+ student sub-populations that I aimed to reach, such as groups of LGBT+ disabled people, for LGBT+ people of colour, and for LGBT+ women.

Seven students from one Russell group institution agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews which ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours. After the interviews the participants were all provided with a standard ‘signposting to support’ document detailing both campus and queer-specific support that they could access either digitally or in-person after what were often deeply personal interviews. I completed three rounds of theme analysis for all transcripts individually (Saldaña 2016), taking particular care to sensitise myself to experiences of gender and sexuality based oppression informed both by scholarship and by my position as a community member, living a queer life in Scotland. I then compared across cases to allow me to discuss synergies and dissonance particularly considering whether the multiple identities of participants might be shaping their experiences in particular ways. To check the authenticity of my representations of participants’ experiences and to examine the trustworthiness of my analysis, I then discussed it with them (Ackerly & True 2010).

The participants were as follows:

Figure 1: showing the details of the sample.

| Pseudonym | Details  | Pronoun   |
|-----------|--|-----------|
| Red       | Red is a white, cisgender, lesbian, woman, home-student <sup>5</sup> in her third year of a humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) subject and was, at the time of interview, on a study-year abroad. | She/her   |
| Orange    | Orange is a white, disabled, genderqueer, homoromantic,  | They/them |

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<sup>5</sup> In this context I am using ‘home student’ to denote anyone who, prior to university, had lived in the UK.

|        |  |                   |
|--------|--|-------------------|
|        | grey-asexual, international <sup>6</sup> student in their final year of a HASS degree.   |                   |
| Yellow | Yellow is a white, pansexual, cisgender, woman, home student studying her third-year abroad of a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) degree.   | She/her           |
| Green  | Green is a white, cisgender, lesbian on the aromantic spectrum, woman, international student, studying her third-year abroad of a HASS degree.   | She/her           |
| Blue   | Blue is a pansexual, queer-romantic, woman, home-student in their first year of a HASS degree.   | She/her/they/them |
| Purple | Purple is a bisexual, black and minority ethnic (BME), woman, international student in her final year of a dual-honours degree straddling HASS and STEM, who experienced mental health issues, but did not identify as disabled. | She/her           |

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<sup>6</sup> In this context I am using 'international student' to denote anyone who prior to university had lived outside of the UK.

|      |  |         |
|------|--|---------|
| Pink | Pink is a BME, cisgender, lesbian, disabled, woman, home-student in her first year of a STEM degree. | She/her |
|------|--|---------|

**Findings: ‘All the little differences kind of can stack up’.**

Unfortunately, despite Scotland being described as the best country in Europe to be LGBTI (ILGA 2015), this study suggests there is work to be done to ensure queer campus communities are fully welcomed, perhaps indicating a difference between legislative equality and lived experience. Four themes were constructed: direct queerphobia; the multiple marginalisation experienced at the intersections of identities; indirect queerphobia; and finally cisheteronormativity. Three suggestions were made to improve institutional provisions for LGBT+ students: consultation and training, providing support, and being proudly proactive.

***Theme 1: Direct queerphobic harassment and bullying.***

‘Initially when I moved to university it was very negative. I received homophobic bullying within my student halls accommodation that wasn’t dealt with in the most efficient way and therefore my first impression of being an LGBT student here [at her university] was very negative’ – Red.

After coming out to her flatmates, Red was subjected to a catalogue of homophobic abuse in her halls of residence including verbal insults, abusive notes, and pranks such as placing mouldy food in her food storage. Halls of residence were found to be a common site of bullying and harassment in other UK studies perhaps because of their status as a mix of private and shared space (Taulke-Johnson 2010a; Valentine et al.

2009; Ellis 2009; Formby 2015). After months of bullying Red became 'too scared and too uncomfortable in my own accommodation at that time', and as a result, with the support of her student LGBT+ group, she asked her university if she could be rehoused, which they agreed to facilitate. However, as Red felt that the process was too slow, she temporarily stayed at the homes of fellow members of the student LGBT+ group until her rehousing could be arranged.

Although Red was satisfied with the outcome of her situation, being successfully moved out of her homophobic flat, it appears that the root of this problem, her peers' homophobia, was not tackled. Although her university had an anti-bullying, harassment and discrimination policy, which made specific mention of their commitment to not tolerating the discrimination, bullying, or harassment of people with all characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010 (EA2010), I would suggest that the university was not fulfilling its own or the EA2010's obligations. The EA2010 specifies that public sector organisations (including universities) should protect individuals with a range of characteristics, including sexual orientation and gender reassignment, from harassment and discrimination, to work towards equality of opportunity, and to foster good relations between those with protected characteristics, and those without. Although in moving Red, the university did prevent her from experiencing further homophobic harassment, it did no work to foster good relations between LGBT+ and cishet students, and it passed the burden of ending the homophobic behaviour (by moving her) onto the queer student. In doing so, the homophobia was tacitly and passively endorsed by the institution who allowed it to exist unchallenged.

As argued by Ahmed (2006) it is exactly these kinds of perceived low-level actions that reinforce a cisheteronormative space to those who already feel othered within it. This is of course in itself problematic, but even more problematic is the impact that this may have on a student's participation in the university. The institution's half-hearted response to Red's situation, wanting to support Red as a student to continue her academic pursuits without having to experience bullying, but feeling unable to go as far as challenging the homophobia she had experienced, suggests a fractured way of looking at queer people rooted in a level of institutional queerphobia.

### ***Theme 2: multiple marginalisation***

Participants who identified with two or more oppressed groups reported experiencing multiple marginalisation at the intersection of their identities. Purple who identified as an international, disabled, bisexual, BME, woman student, felt the intersectionality of her existence intensified the oppression that she experienced:

‘All the little differences kind of can stack up I think and make people feel less welcome’.

Purple felt particularly that as an international, BME student she was conspicuously different within a very white institution. She therefore carefully negotiated coming out for fear of further othering. As a bisexual woman she felt able to allow people to question her about boyfriends or potential boyfriends without needing to be open about the possibility of also dating people of other genders if she did not feel safe to do so, as she did not feel she was lying, rather just holding some of her experiences back.

Although Purple spoke about this in a matter-of-fact manner, it has been argued that the self-moderation involved in decisions about whether or not to 'come out' moves the burden from queerphobic society onto the individual, and thus can drain LGBT+ people's energy (Renn 1998). The perception of an obligation, both socially and for safety, to risk assess situations, make decisions about appropriate responses, and then moderate behaviour accordingly, can be a stressor not just because of the cognitive load of self-moderation, but also because of the resulting inability to be one's authentic self, which has been shown to damage both mental and physical health (Meyer 2003).

Pink, who identified as a disabled, BME lesbian, reported that prior to university she had experienced homophobia in her BME community, so although she considered joining the student group for her BME community at university, she decided not to, based on previously experienced discrimination. Her experiences chime with the findings of Robert Rhoads' (1994) study which found that some gay and bisexual students of colour felt under pressure to choose between their communities, aligning themselves either with their BME **or** LGBT+ community, for fear of prejudice (racism in the LGBT+ community, or queerphobia in their BME community).

Although this study has focussed on the alienation of LGBT+ students from a cisheteronormative institution, the institution is equally a space of white domination, oppressing and ostracising people of colour (Ahmed 2006; Dumas 1998; hooks 2000). Therefore safe spaces for LGBT+ students of colour are likely to be very important (Fox & Ore 2010), not simply as a space that is free from racism and queerphobia simultaneously, but also because being able to connect with and be part of a



community can be important for developing identity, gaining support in the face of discrimination and harassment, and building coping mechanisms (Calabrese et al. 2015; Meyer 2003; Cyrus 2017).

On attending the student LGBT+ group, Pink found that she was one of very few students of colour.

‘When I first went to the first [student-led LGBT+ group’s] Freshers’ Week event I was quite nervous because I didn’t really expect there to be any other people of colour there and I was quite nervous of being just the only [BME] person there... I would say anything but white, gay men are under-represented.’

Pink was one of only two students of colour who attended the Freshers’ Week event. However, unlike participants in other research (Rhoads 1994; Dumas 1998), Pink did not report encountering racism within the group and stated that it was a very positive experience. The group operated as a ‘safe space’, proactively stating that discrimination and harassment would be challenged, which had impressed Pink and made her feel more comfortable.

Red experienced harassment at the intersection of her identity as a lesbian and as a woman, which included street harassment whilst holding hands with a partner, and harassment in ‘straight clubs’ (clubs that were not explicitly and exclusively queer) from men.

‘Individually I’ve had men touch me inappropriately, or put their hand up my skirt for example, on a dance floor because they think that they can. With a partner I’ve had abuse, or the opposite where people have been like “oh yeah that’s what I want to see!” if I’ve been showing any kind of affection to a partner.’

As these experiences left Red feeling ‘very uncomfortable and very unsafe’, she has subsequently chosen to frequent exclusively queer venues, where she feels she never gets harassed. It is worth noting that this is likely to be in part as a function of her privilege as a white, cisgender person, and that people of colour and trans people (amongst others) have reported not feeling so safe or welcome in LGBT+ spaces (Formby 2017).

Red may have identified a wider issue in her experiences in ‘straight clubs’: ‘lesbiphobia’. In the ‘I kissed a girl’ generation (Katy Perry 2008) the commercial propagation of affection and sex between women by the mainstream media as a consumable for the enjoyment of men, has spilled out of the media domain (e.g. film, music, still image, pornography, and television) into ‘real life’. This has resulted in some men feeling that they are entitled to co-opt any affection between women that they bear witness to for their own pleasure and domination (Diamond 2005). All of these examples show that although of course experiences of queerphobia are detrimental to LGBT+ students’ experiences, those experiences of queerphobia are further complicated when students identify into two or more oppressed or minoritised groups. Therefore, taking an intersectional approach is essential when we try to understand and support LGBT+ students; we must pay sufficient attention to the

possibility of intersecting identities and prejudices as additional elements of students' experiences.

***Theme 3: Indirect experiences of queerphobia.***

During the interviews all participants talked about their indirect experiences of queerphobia, through friends or acquaintances' experiences. Meyer describes how reminders that one belongs to a stigmatised group can result in people being hyper-vigilant (1995), so even when LGBT+ people haven't directly experienced queerphobia, the expectation or fear that it could happen based on the experiences of other members of the community, can have a negative impact on their mental health and a moderating effect on how they live their lives.

Red described the experience of one friend from the student-led LGBT+ group being spat on and homophobically abused in a street in the city and another friend who faced significant consequences after being tagged on social media with his partner, as he was not 'out' to his family.

'They [his parents] decided to pull his funding and because he could not provide the funding himself, that meant his visa was going to run out and he had to back to [his country of origin]... the whole experience was very distressing' – Red.

Red found these indirect experiences of homophobia distressing, both because they reminded her of the homophobia present in wider society, but also because in the latter incident the university were made aware of her friend's unsafe situation and failed to intervene. This perceived refusal of help to Red's friend, demonstrated to her

yet another denial of queer realities and another reinforcement of the university as a cisheteronormative space.

Pink talked about witnessing trans students being harassed online by a fellow student:

‘There was someone who was using slurs against someone who identified as transgender and there were no consequences for that person at all’.

She felt that this had not only compromised the safety of the trans student in question, but also of the wider online community, in what was meant to be a safe space for LGBT+ students. Students’ awareness of their proximity, whether direct or indirect, to queerphobia served as a consistent reminder that their safety was merely temporary, and could at any point be breached. As a result all participants expressed the need for a ‘safe space’ to inhabit, where they could gain support and express their queer identity fearlessly.

‘To me safe space means a space where you can express yourself on the basis of your sexual, romantic and gender identity without having anyone question your identity or try to invalidate it or to or flat out refuse it or be against you as a person on the basis of that’ – Green.

This safe space was provided by exclusively queer spaces, which for all participants but one was provided through the student LGBT+ group; a group run by and for students aiming to provide support and organise social events for queer students on campus. The participants had found exclusively queer spaces ‘transformative’,

allowing them to explore their LGBT+ identities, gain support, and develop pride. This is particularly important as for many of the participants, university was the first time they had explored their LGBT+ identity, and for all others this was the first time they were living fully 'out' lives.

Although the experiences of queerphobia, both direct and indirect, that participants reported were often outside of the classroom, it cannot be presumed that they do not have an impact on students' academic pursuits. This is both because of their impact on students' mental health and because without feeling integrated both academically and socially within university life there may be a threat to retention (Meyer 1995; Meyer 2003; Tinto 1975). Campus life is wider than students' scheduled contact hours with teaching staff, expanding out into students' broader development and lifelong learning in multiple ways including but not limited to, their paid employment and internships, their social and sporting pursuits, and their volunteering and charitable activities, as well as their broader personal development. Their safety and comfort throughout any element of their life whilst studying, is relevant to their university experience, and therefore should be of importance to their institution. In turn, as the primary provider of a supportive, safe space for LGBT+ students at the university, the organisation and support of the student LGBT+ group should be valued by the institution, particularly as running such an organisation can be very high pressure and students doing so are thus at risk of burnout (Scott 1991; Outcalt 1998).

#### ***Theme 4: Cisheteronormativity.***

Six participants felt the university had attempted to welcome queer students through their partnership with the Students' Association to organise a campus celebration of

LGBT History Month. However, all participants felt that the university could improve significantly; that whilst the University acknowledged LGBT+ students' issues at a superficial level, these were not prioritised nor satisfactorily addressed. Red argued that,

‘on a very basic level they acknowledge that discrimination exists and they would openly say that they support LGBT rights and they support their students. But when it comes down to it they don’t understand the severity of the issues that exist amongst the LGBT community, and therefore don’t act accordingly’.

Orange described the university taking an ‘everyone is equal’ attitude which they felt was problematic as the institution had not checked that the lived reality of students matched this assumption, and unfortunately it did not. This is described by Meyer as a ‘distinctiveness threat’ to one’s mental health (2003): where a subset of one’s experiences, in this case one’s LGBT+ identity, is denied validity. In an institution proclaiming that everyone is equal, and ignoring protestations from LGBT+ students that their experiences are distinct from their cishet peers, they may contribute to the stress experienced by the queer campus community, reinforcing cisheteronormativity by denying the existence of queerphobia.

At a localised classroom and curriculum level, Blue, Orange, Red and Purple all spoke about opportune moments to address queer issues as part of their studies that had been over-looked by staff. They felt that it would be beneficial to include more queer subject-matter in the curriculum to recognise LGBT+ people’s contribution to

academia which has been explored in other institutions (University of Birmingham 2016). Blue compared this to efforts she had noticed to include more women in her discipline.

Purple argued however that it was not good enough simply to include queer issues in the curriculum; their discussion had to be carefully managed. When trans identities had been discussed as part of Purple's courses, the discussion had evoked comments from her peers which she had found problematic and which had not been challenged by staff.

'I go by she/her pronouns but it's not that cut and dry...It [trans-ignorant comments] didn't make me uncomfortable in the sense that I wasn't welcome in the room, but it did kind of reinforce the norm where you're like 'oh fuck, I'm an aberration!', and in a way I was uncomfortable... Anything that is done, or not done, is a massive sort of ripple and shows people that this isn't necessarily their space as much as it is other peoples in a way' – Purple.

As a result of these comments Purple said that she did not feel comfortable coming out in front of these peers, again contributing to the pressure to self-moderate (Meyer 2003). The poor management of this situation, as discussed in the introduction to this article, may have arisen because staff felt under-resourced to challenge or because fear about 'saying the wrong thing' may have paralysed them from saying anything at all. However, of course not acting to mediate or challenge inappropriate classroom comments is unacceptable, and I argue violates universities' public sector duties to

protect LGBT+ students from queerphobia and improve relations between LGBT+ and cisnet people.

All students felt that provisions for trans students needed drastic improvement. Pink witnessed her lecturer misgendering a trans classmate, whilst Green's lecturer had stated that a pregnant man was a logical impossibility, thus excluding trans men in the classroom (after being identified as problematic by a trans man in the class, this was addressed). The lack of gender-neutral toilets in university buildings was problematic for Orange who identified as non-binary, as was the long process for changing gender on the university's systems, and the exclusive provision of single-sex halls of residence, which were all issues also raised through Formby's work (2015), indicating that there is perhaps not a huge difference between students' experiences across the nations. These small incidents all served to remind students of their difference from their university's norm (Ahmed 2006). Pink summed this up by saying,

‘people are just kind of heteronormative, cisnormative when they're talking, and they kind of just exclude you by accident without even thinking about it’.

These perhaps seemingly small incidents serve as microaggressions and microinvalidations (Sue et al. 2007) to LGBT+ students, given both their ubiquity and their situatedness in the context of cisheteronormativity and unaddressed queerphobia. In this study these experiences were also contextualised by the experiences of sexism, ableism, and racism meaning that students could be multiply marginalised (Ward 2008). In sum, both in terms of legal and moral duty the university should want to do better.



### **Improving institutional provisions for LGBT+ students.**

Given the institutional cisheteronormativity and queerphobia participants reported, they all had ideas of how their university could improve. Firstly, at the most basic level, by developing training through consultation with LGBT+ students in order to ensure staff are equipped to successfully challenge queerphobia where it arises. Secondly, by providing tailored support for queer students, and thirdly, most ambitiously, by asking the university to proudly and proactively celebrate its queer campus community. It is important to note however that none of these suggestions are out with the scope of the public sector duties of the EA2010, they are moreover suggestions of how institutions could go beyond mere statutory compliance, to embrace the spirit of the act more wholeheartedly.

#### ***1. Consultation and training.***

To challenge the prevailing institutional perception that LGBT+ students were unproblematically included, participants felt that it would be useful for students and staff members to work together to share experiences and challenge misconceptions about queer campus life. They suggested that this could begin with the institution inviting LGBT+ student representatives to join formal university committee structures. This would both open a channel of dialogue that was able to respond dynamically to an ever-changing campus climate, and symbolise a move to proactively giving students voice in the most senior universities forums, and meaningfully listening to them. However it would of course be important to ward against people occupying these positions who might not represent the full diversity of the LGBT+ campus community (Ward 2008), and therefore support for these

representative roles and active recruitment from under-represented groups may be necessary to ensure their effectiveness.

Further to this, to help equip staff who often find it difficult to challenge queerphobia or cisheteronormativity, it was suggested that guided by LGBT+ student representatives, specific training on queer issues for staff could be developed. Educating and empowering staff to know how to support LGBT+ students and challenge unacceptable views and behaviour where identified, could make a real difference to the campus climate, reducing the existence of campus queerphobia and improving LGBT+ students' confidence in the institution by sending a clear message that queerphobia is not tolerated.

## ***2. Providing support***

As all participants had experienced queerphobia as part of their university experience (whether directly or indirectly) support, and in particular the need for explicitly queer-friendly support, was a recurrent suggestion. In order to challenge the pervasive queerphobia, Yellow suggested the university could offer LGBT+ specific counselling with counsellors who had specialist training in queer issues. Further to this, inspired by her study-abroad institution's scheme and appreciating the strains placed on university counselling services, she suggested that professional counsellors could be supported by a network of trained queer peer support student volunteers, helping to address the extra stresses and pressures caused by queerphobia and cisheteronormativity faced by LGBT+ students during the course of their studies. This would both build the confidence and skills of the queer peer support volunteers, which some have suggested might otherwise be denied because of queerphobia (Scott 1991) and build the capacity in what is often an over-stretched and under-funded

counselling service. However it will also be important to recognise that the queer campus community will not have a homogenous experience and that anyone, whether staff member or student volunteer, will also have to have a wide lens of understanding to facilitate the exploration of the multiple intersecting identities held by students.

### ***3. Being proudly proactive***

Although ensuring that LGBT+ students are sufficiently supported and provided for is a priority, equally important to the participants was the university being visibly and proudly proactive on queer issues, not simply working out strategies for supporting students in the (perceived inevitable) face of queerphobia. It would be impressive to see the institution using its own time and resources to celebrate its queer campus community. Although the point of this was that the university would have its own ideas, outside those suggested by students, Yellow suggested that a start could also be a university queer poster series would help LGBT+ students feel welcomed, showing that the university celebrated their contribution to academia, and send a strong message that queerphobia would not be tolerated.

‘Questioning students will see that these identities are real and then people who might have homophobic view will see “oh hang on we can’t be homophobic dicks right now because the university is not going to tolerate it”.’

Secondly, it was suggested that as a matter of course, where relevant and appropriate, queer issues and figures should be discussed as part of the curriculum, as is currently being explored in England (University of Birmingham 2016), and where staff members were comfortable, that LGBT+ faculty members be visibly out. The onus, participants argued, should be on staff to seek out ways to diversify their curriculum

in this manner, rather than on students to suggest material, and should be handled with assertiveness and sensitivity. Finally, University spaces should offer gender-neutral facilities (toilets, changing areas, halls of residence), and ensure there are options to state pronouns (rather than wait for students to instigate conversations about them), and that staff use them consistently, to ensure that the university is welcoming of trans students whether or not any trans students are currently enrolled.

### **Bringing things together.**

This study suggests that despite perceptions that universities would be welcoming spaces for queer people to inhabit (Taulke-Johnson 2008; Formby 2015), queerphobia is still unfortunately present at least at this institution. Whether directly, through first-hand experience, or indirectly through the experiences of friends and acquaintances, all participants in this study had experienced queerphobia, and this was compounded where the intersection of students' identities meant they were multiply marginalised. In addition to this however, participants also identified the university as cisgender, heteroromantic, and heterosexual in the organisation of its spaces, policies and practices. Much like the experiences of students in the RUK and the US, participants observed that their curricula were dominated by cisheteronormative subject matter (Chesnut 1998; Formby 2015; Ahmed 2006), that staff were under-prepared to manage queer inclusion (Lucozzi 1998; Robinson 1998; Longerbeam et al. 2007), and that university buildings and policies excluded trans students (Formby 2015). This cemented the university as a cisheteronormative space, in which queer students were forced to either fit in, or face conspicuously standing out (Ahmed 2006).

These experiences meant that participants felt a strong need for 'safe spaces' on campus, currently provided for the most part by the student-led LGBT+ group, which

places a significant responsibility on the student leaders of these groups' shoulders and may contribute to stress and burnout (Renn 1998; Outcalt 1998; Scott 1991). These experiences should be of concern to the participants' university, both as a duty of care and as an issue of legal compliance. From a caring perspective the stress of queerphobia and cisheteronormativity may have a negative impact on LGBT+ students' mental health (Renn 1998; Meyer 1995; Meyer 2003), and affect their retention and success. From a legal compliance perspective, under the EA2010 universities are required to protect LGBT+ people on campus from harassment and discrimination, and to work to improve equality and foster good relations between LGBT+ people and their cishet counterparts. For the participants in this study, it appeared that their university was failing on all counts, the consequence of which may become more apparent now students are able to report their sexuality and trans identity to their institution (UCAS 2015), but regardless of which they should want to do better.

Based on participants' responses and in light of findings from previous studies I argue that a radical shift would be necessary to transform universities from institutions who tentatively attempt to fulfil their legal obligation to protect students from queerphobia and support them if they encounter it, to proudly proactive institutions, not simply supporting, but celebrating queer campus communities. To facilitate this radical transformation I, informed by the participants in this study, have proposed three levels of activity: firstly consulting with queer students to develop training to empower staff to challenge queerphobia if it arises; secondly, providing queer-specific emotional and pastoral support for students; and thirdly proudly and proactively working to make buildings, policies, and practices accessible to and inclusive of queer students.

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## Appendix 1 – Glossary

This glossary of terms is intended to help readers of this paper to understand some of the language used in it. The language in the LGBT+ community is constantly changing in response to our dynamic community, and although this might be how I understand terminology it may not be the definitions that others would use. This glossary was produced through my own personal experiences in the LGBT+ community, my interactions with participants, colleagues and friends about their own identities, and through some very helpful websites (referenced at the end):

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Agender    | Someone who identifies as being without gender.   |
| Aromantic  | Someone who does not experience romantic feelings and/ or attraction.   |
| Asexual    | Someone who does not experience sexual feelings and/or attraction.  |
| Bigender   | A person who experiences two gender identities.   |
| Biphobia   | Discrimination and/or harassment aimed at someone because of their presumed or known bisexual or biromantic identity.   |
| Biromantic | Someone romantically attracted to men and women. It is to note that sometimes the term is used to describe a person who is attracted to people of all genders, not just men and women.  |
| Bisexual   | Someone sexually attracted to men and women; this is sometimes used to also entail romantic attraction. It is to note that sometimes the term is used to describe a person who is attracted to people of all genders, not just men and women. |

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Cisgender             | Someone who identifies as their gender assigned at birth.  |
| Cisheterosexism       | The imposition of a compulsory cisgender, heterosexual, heteroromantic existence.  |
| Cisnormative          | The assumption that everyone is and should be cisgender.   |
| Coming out            | The process of an LGBT+ person telling others about their sexual, romantic, or gender identity, or gender history.   |
| Demisexual            | Someone who only experiences sexual attraction to a person with whom they have a strong emotional connection.  |
| Gay                   | Someone who is romantically and/ or sexually attracted to people of the same gender as themselves.   |
| Genderfluid           | Someone whose gender identity is unfixed; this falls under the non-binary umbrella.  |
| Gender non-conforming | Someone who does not conform to societal expectations of gender expression.  |
| Genderqueer           | A queer gender identity under the non-binary umbrella that resists being fixed.  |
| Gender-neutral        | Often used to describe facilities not designated for a specific gender, but instead open to those with all gender or none.                                   |
| Grey-romantic         | Someone who self-identifies as experiencing romantic feelings towards the aromantic end of the spectrum, however may sometimes experience romantic feelings. |

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Heteronormative | The presumption that everyone is and should be heterosexual and heteroromantic.  |
| Heteroromantic  | Someone who is romantically attracted to people of a different to themselves, commonly defined within a binary construction of gender (e.g. a man attracted to women, or a woman attracted to men).                                      |
| Heterosexism    | The oppressive presumption, and actions leading from the presumption, that everyone is heterosexual and heteroromantic.  |
| Heterosexual    | Someone who is sexually attracted to people of a different gender to themselves, commonly defined within a binary construction of gender (e.g. a man attracted to women or a woman attracted to men).                                    |
| Homophobia      | Discrimination and harassment based on someone's perceived or known attraction to others of the same gender as themselves.   |
| Homoromantic    | Someone who is romantically attracted to people of the same gender as themselves.  |
| Homosexual      | Someone who is sexually attracted to people of the same gender as themselves; often taken to include romantic attraction.  |
| Intersex        | Intersex people are those that cannot be categorised by biological sex characteristics under the norms historically associated with 'male' and 'female' bodies. Some intersex people identify under the LGBT+ umbrella, and some do not. |
| Lesbian         | A woman who is attracted sexually and/or romantically attracted to other women.  |

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| LGBT+       | An umbrella acronym including all those who identify as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans or who define their sexual, romantic or gender identity outside of simultaneous cisgender, heteroromantic, heterosexuality.  |
| Non-binary  | Non-binary is an umbrella term for all people who identify their gender outside of the gender binary, and therefore do not identify as a man or woman.   |
| Pangendered | Someone who identifies as all genders; this identity falls under the non-binary umbrella.  |
| Panromantic | Someone who is romantically attracted to people of all genders.  |
| Pansexual   | Someone who is sexually attracted to people of all genders.  |
| Pride       | Both the name given to the feeling and the protest march celebrating the feeling of being unapologetically proud of one's sexual, romantic, or gender identity in the face of adversity.   |
| Queer       | The term queer is used in many different ways and its purpose is to be fluid, dynamic. It is used in this study to describe those whose identity resists cisgender, heteroromantic, heterosexual norms and defines sexual, romantic, or gender identity beyond them. However this term has been used as a slur against LGBT+ people. |
| Queerphobia | Discrimination and harassment of anyone who does not, or is perceived to not, simultaneously define as cisgender, heterosexual and heteroromantic.   |
| Trans       | An umbrella term for all people who do not identify as the gender they were assigned at birth.   |

Transphobia

Discrimination and harassment of someone because of their known or perceived trans identity.

LGBT Youth Scotland LGBTI Terminology [online] Available at:  
<https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/LGBTI-terminology>

Stonewall Glossary of Terms [online] Available at:  
<http://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/glossary-terms>

The Safe Zone Project LGBTQ+ Terminology: An evolution over time [online]  
Available at: <http://thesafezoneproject.com/update/lgbtq-terminology-an-evolution-over-time/>

The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) [online]:  
<http://www.asexuality.org/?q=general.html>

Scottish Trans [online]: <https://www.scottishtrans.org/trans-rights/an-intro-to-trans-terms/>